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STATEMENT ON CULTURE
BY KOK KSOR, PRESIDENT OF THE MONTAGNARD FOUNDATION

My name is Kok Ksor and I represent the Montagnard Foundation. My statement today address culture-related issues concerning the indigenous Degar hill tribes that live in Vietnam's Central Highlands and that are known with the French name "Montagnards".

The Degar people is one of the oldest indigenous groups in South East Asia, that over the last half century, before during and after the Indo-Chinese wars, has suffered all sorts of discriminations and violent repressions that have killed over a couple of million peoples. Moreover, for three decades we have been at the center of a campaign carried out by the Vietnamese government that is trying to annul our cultural roots, which is forcing the Degar people off their ancestral lands, condemning us to a life of poverty.

One of our basic grievances is that our culture, our way of life connected with our ancestral lands is being destroyed and eroded. Like all indigenous groups we have a special relationship with mother earth, a relationship that is being destroyed by ideology and national politics with the silence of the international community.

The government of Vietnam has actually prohibited us from practicing our 'centuries old' slash and burn agriculture farming which is a defining element of our society and our connection to the land. All adult members of the Montagnard community take part in the traditional methods of planting and harvesting our crops around the outskirts of the villages.

Vietnam has sought to destroy our culture by forcibly relocating us from our ancestral villages and compelling us to farm permanent fields in a Vietnamese style in new locations. Our ancestral lands have today been turned into coffee, rubber and pepper plantations run by the government, all crops that are foreign to our culture and tradition.

Not only should this be considered a sort of cultural destruction, but our people are forced to live on inferior crop-lands where are people suffer poverty and malnutrition. UNICEF's report on Vietnam recognized in 2001 that "*Children belonging to ethnic minority groups are extremely vulnerable and suffer from poverty*"

Vietnam's cultural destructive policies are in violation of international law, namely Article 27 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Cultural Rights* and the general principals of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Further the violations breach Article 15, 1 (a) of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICE-SCR), which clearly defines the right to "*To take part in cultural life*".

Let me also draw the attention of the permanent forum to "*General Comment 23*" of the Human Rights Committee on Article 27, where the Committee states that "*those (cultural) rights may require positive legal measures of protection and measures to ensure the effective participation of members of minority communities in decisions which affect them*".

In 2002, Vietnam's Permanent Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made a public statement indicating the government's intent to fully eliminate our peoples traditional agriculture methods.

Religious belief has always been an important part of our culture. In the past it was a sort of animism, today is Christianity. In fact, over the last fifty years, our people decided to convert to various denominations of Christianity. This free choice has become another reason for repression and discrimination.

The persecution against the Degar people reached a climax this Easter, when on April 10, 2004 tens of thousands of indigenous Montagnards conducted peaceful demonstrations inside Vietnam's Central Highlands calling for an end to years of religious persecution and confiscation of ancestral lands. Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces brutally attacked the peaceful demonstrations.

On 22 April 2004, Human Rights Watch stated that *"Vietnamese security forces appear to have coordinated with armed men in civilian clothing to savagely attack Montagnard protesters at more than a dozen mass demonstrations during Easter weekend"*.

Human Rights Watch further stated, *"We've received alarming reports that scores of protesters were wounded during the demonstrations, and that some protesters were beaten to death."* The demonstrations were also reported by international media outlets, which at time mischaracterized the events alleging the use of violence by the Montagnards.

Human Rights Watch states it had, *"received firsthand reports that security forces and men in civilian clothing, armed with metal bars, shovels, clubs with nails attached to them, machetes, and chains, confronted Montagnard protesters at more than a dozen locations leading into Buon Ma Thuot, the capital of Dak Lak province, on the morning of April 10. According to witnesses, the demonstrators were not armed, although some defended themselves when attacked by throwing stones at the police."*

Human Rights Watch confirmed 10 killed and Amnesty International confirmed 8 killed. I however, have recently received information direct from my people that 276 of our people were killed and the Montagnard Foundation intends to make the list public for the international community to investigate.

For the last 3 years, the Vietnamese government has maintained this type of repressive paramilitary operations and persecution against our peoples. Persecution that includes summary executions, imprisonments, disappearances, coercive sterilizations of our woman, electric shock torture, rape and religious persecution.

It is noted that our culture, our right to live as indigenous people is directly related to these human rights violations. In May 2003 the US International Commission for Religious Freedom stated, *"the increased repression of religious freedom has been reportedly sanctioned at the highest levels of the Vietnamese government."*

Our people who manage to flee this persecution to Cambodian refugee camps are hunted down and sold for bounties – a policy that was publicly condemned by UN Special Envoy Peter Leuprecht.

The US State Department reported in 2004 that, *"Ethnic minority, unregistered Protestant congregations in the Central Highlands and in the northwest provinces continued to suffer severe abuses"*. These human rights violations are the result of cultural destruction enforced by a uncaring government.

I take special note of the July 2002 where the UN Human Rights Committee, in its 75th session, stigmatized the repressive policy of the Vietnamese Government towards the Montagnard people, stating that it was: *"concerned at the lack of specific information concerning indigenous peoples, especially the Degar (Montagnard), and about measures taken to ensure that their rights under article 27 to enjoy their cultural traditions, including their religion and language, as well as their agricultural activities, are respected. The State party should take immediate measures to ensure that the rights of members of indigenous communities are respected. Non-governmental organizations and other human rights monitors should be granted access to the central highlands"*.

In an attempt to silence our cry for human rights the Vietnamese government without any evidence has even declared to the United Nations that I am a terrorist whilst I was speaking at the 2002 Human Rights Commission under the item of Indigenous issues.

It is imperative that human rights monitors are granted access to the central highlands as recommended by the 75th session of the Human Rights Committee.

It is imperative that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteurs and the UNHCR are permitted to operate freely in Cambodia and Vietnam, and that both Cambodia and Vietnam abide by the Refugee Convention.

These actions are needed to end the cultural destruction and violation of fundamental rights suffered by the Montagnard people over the last 30 years.